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ZNR UUUUU ZZH (CCY TXT ADX: 140655 MSI4017 TMC)
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FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8037
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 1918
RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON PRIORITY 2720
RHHJJPI/PACOM IDHS HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

UNCLAS DHAKA 001358

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS
C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (ADDING CAPTION)

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [PTER](#) [KDEM](#) [EAID](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: EARLY RETURNS SHOW AN AWAMI LEAGUE SWEEP IN PARLIAMENTARY
ELECTIONS

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Early unofficial returns from Bangladesh's Parliamentary elections on 12/29 indicate a landslide victory for the Awami League led by former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The Awami League spokesman told PolOff that Hasina would offer to work closely with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led by her political rival, former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. Should Hasina follow through with such conciliatory gestures she could begin the transformation of Bangladesh politics that have been plagued by endemic violence and a winner-take-all mentality. That would greatly improve prospects of making this moderate, predominantly Moslem nation of 150 million people a stable democracy and a reliable partner in the war on terror.

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A LANDSLIDE FOR THE AWAMI LEAGUE

¶2. (SBU) As unofficial election results came in the evening of 12/29, giddy Awami League leaders appeared stunned by the scope of their victory. Party Spokesman Syed Ashraf Islam expected the Awami League to win up to 210 seats in the 300-member Parliament, a two-thirds majority that would give the party power to amend the constitution. Journalists gave similar projections; some said the Awami League margin could be even higher. Many prominent BNP national leaders appeared set to lose their seats, including party Secretary General Khandaker Delwar Hossain, Standing Committee Members Shamsul Islam and Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain, and party Vice Chairman M.K. Anwar. Another apparent loser was Motiur Rahman Nizami, the head of the BNP's main political ally, the Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami.

AWAMI LEAGUE NEXT STEPS

¶3. (SBU) Reached by phone in his home constituency, Awami League Spokesman Ashraf said Sheikh Hasina was preparing a speech in which she would be "kind and generous" to her opponents and invite them to work together. Others said the Awami League was mulling how best to reach out to Khaleda Zia to create an atmosphere of cooperation between two parties that historically have reveled in tearing one another down. Hasina also has reportedly urged Awami League supporters to show restraint in reacting to their victory. Ashraf said other actions the party would take included increasing the number of Parliament seats reserved for women and ratifying Caretaker Government ordinances, many of which were designed to end endemic political fraud and corruption. He said the party also would consider reverting back to Bangladesh's 1973 constitution, which banned political parties organized in the name of religion. That would be a direct attack on Jamaat-e-Islami, the BNP ally.

WHY THE APPARENT WIPE-OUT?

14. (SBU) In retrospect, the BNP decision to focus its campaign on criticism of the two-year-old Caretaker Government appears to have been a mistake. While high food prices angered many during the past year, Bangladeshis applauded the Caretaker Government's efforts to fight endemic corruption. Media reports two weeks before the election implicating Khaleda Zia's youngest son in a bribery scandal involving Siemens also may have hurt the BNP. Ashraf argued that young, first-time voters and women - demographic groups probably most disillusioned by graft - strongly supported the Awami League. The election outcome also likely reflects widespread public dissatisfaction with the 2001-2006 BNP government.

COMMENT: HOW WILL THE BNP REACT?

15. (SBU) The BNP reaction to the apparent thumping remained unclear as of 2200 local time on 12/29. Should the party blame the loss on allegations of media and Caretaker Government bias, what so far has been an unusually smooth election could yet turn ugly. Sheikh Hasina's expected victory speech on 12/30 will be an important opportunity to set a more civil tone to Bangladesh's typically take-no-prisoners politics, and the Embassy will urge the Awami League to be magnanimous in victory. Likewise, the Embassy will urge the BNP to accept the results of what so far appears to have been a fair and credible election and to play a responsible role in opposition.